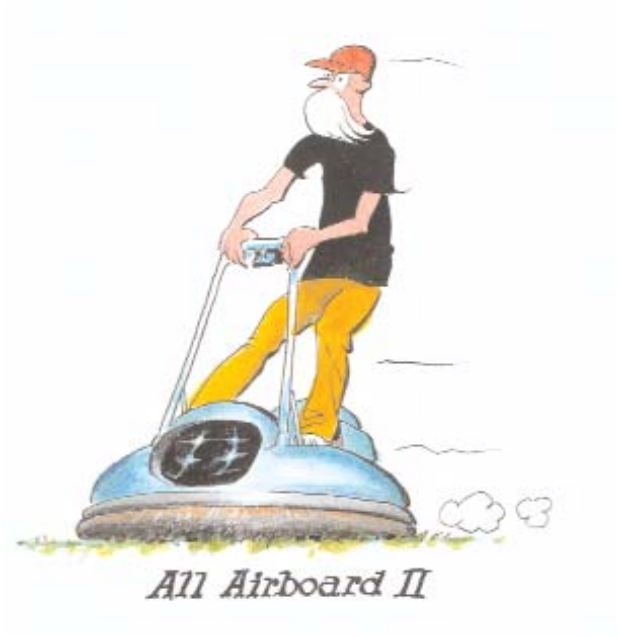
Grampaw Pettibone

Illustrations by Ted Wilbur



Cobra Crunch!

All aircrew involved in a two-ship AH-1W Cobra mission had flown a similar event in the same working area at least once in the previous two days. On this day the mission commander did not use a briefing guide for the brief. They did not discuss operational risk management during the brief nor did any of the aircrew sign an ORM assessment. The mission commander did not brief IMC procedures, lost aircraft procedures, or how the aircraft were to rendezvous in flight if one aircraft was delayed. At the conclusion of the brief there were no questions regarding the brief from the aircrew in attendance.

Local authorities familiar with the area briefed the crew concerning hazards, noise sensitive areas, and airfield operations. Just over an hour later, the lead Cobra launched to conduct night reconnaissance operations in its assigned area. The second aircraft had maintenance issues during start up and launched 20 minutes later after corrective maintenance.

Upon checking in, local control transferred the division lead to a second facility. When Dash 2 checked in, the division lead asked the second aircraft to state their position. Dash 2 replied, "We are 14 miles northeast." Local control attempted to contact Dash 1 but received no response. Dash 2 offered to relay. The ground controller passed to Dash 2 where he wanted the second section to conduct flight reconnaissance. Dash 2 relayed this information incorrectly. Dash 1's response was "roger, we are looking at something, standby."

Dash 2 then entered the working area and descended to approximately 300 feet. Eager to begin the reconnaissance mission and knowing that possible targets had been located, Dash 2 did so without determining the position of Dash 1.

Less than two minutes later, the flight paths of Dash 1 and Dash 2 merged in a co-altitude, right-to-right pass, at a separation of approximately 41 feet. Neither aircraft made an evasive maneuver prior to the collision. The two Cobras' blades struck approximately 3 feet from the blade tip, tearing the rotor head and transmission assemblies from both aircraft. Both aircraft crashed and burned with all four aviators killed.

The subsequent investigation revealed that two of the mishap aviators had flown as a crew a few nights before the fatal flight. During that flight, the crew made numerous procedural errors and examples of poor airmanship, including airspace encroachment without permission. But following that flight, the section did not conduct a debrief.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Mishaps like this one get Gramps to wondering if anybody out there listens to him at all. If "brief the flight, fly the brief" ain't the oldest saw known to them what sport shoes o' brown then I don't know what is. I don't care how many times you done flown in an op area or how repetitive hops seem. BRIEF THE

FLIGHT. FLY THE BRIEF. Oh, and another thing: debrief the flight.

We may not have had a fancy ORM set up when I was flyin' missions, but we knew better than to ignore obvious risks. Not only did these folks ignore briefing procedures, but then they ignored another tool 'ol Gramps thinks is pretty good. ORM is that new fangled tool to find all the risks you might not'a seen before they become trouble. Just one more step that might have saved some lives.

Oh, you can—as Nipper Pettibone says—"blow me off" if you want. But before you do, think of these four dead aviators and this midair that was oh-so-preventable.

'Nuff said... again.

Gramps from Yesteryear

Most Preventable

The lieutenant Naval Aviator manned his A-7E Corsair for a night practice carrier landing period. Following an uneventful preflight, start, taxi, and takeoff, he proceeded to the outlying field.

Upon entering the pattern, he commenced his approaches. The first seven were normal; on the eighth, in addition to the standard ball call, the pilot added the words "bingo pass." This comment, though confirmed by other aircraft in the pattern, was not heard by any of the four LSOs.

The Corsair continued its approach to touchdown. Leveling on the downwind leg following this approach, the pilot raised his gear and then his flaps. At a position slightly past the normal 180-degree position, he transmitted his intention to depart the pattern for home plate. Shortly thereafter, he was instructed by the LSO to remain in the pattern.

After returning to landing configuration, he flew his ninth approach to touchdown. Believing his session at the field to be over, he retracted his landing gear but left his flaps down. He then asked the LSO for his total number of approaches.

At this point, the pilot states he was instructed to remain in the pattern for one more approach. He radioed his concern about his low fuel caution light. Asked by the LSO, he stated he had 1,350 pounds remaining. The LSO replied that he was now cleared to depart for home base and received an acknowledgement.

The pilot, misunderstanding or not hearing his clearance to depart, continued from the 180-degree position for another approach, configured with flaps down and landing gear up. He called the ball and received a late "Roger." In close, he was asked his side number, which he gave. At this time, the LSOs believed he had already departed for home plate. Confusion as to who was on the ball prompted a confirmation call by the LSO. By the time they discovered that the Corsair was, in fact, making another approach. The pilot had arrived at ramp position. No one discovered positively that the aircraft had no gear until it passed the waveoff point.

The pilot continued the approach and subsequently touched down with his landing gear up. He initiated ejection shortly after touchdown and landed uninjured on the runway. The aircraft continued to slide, departing the runway from the right side, and became airborne again approximately 3,000 feet from initial impact. It flew, on fire, an additional three nautical miles, finally impacting an uninhabited wooded area northeast of the field.

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great balls of fire! I'm really torn up over this—again! No matter how many times we preach that a "break in habit pattern" is a setup for a checklist omission, some aviators obviously don't believe it until it's too late.

When we sit around and shoot the breeze about "rollers up" landings or passes, the consensus is that there are those who have made wheels-up landings or passes and those who are lucky. Not so! There are those who use checklists and those who don't. It's that simple.